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The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State

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Rachel M. Scott, *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). Pp. 277. \$65 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

If Islamists took power in Egypt, then what kind of state would they make, and what role could non-Muslims play in it? This question stands at the heart of Rachel M. Scott's compelling book, which draws upon an array of published Arabic sources and interviews. "The question of the role of non-Muslims in an Islamic state," argues Scott, "runs parallel to many issues that emerge in discussions about Islamist thought in general, such as the Islamist positions on democracy, pluralism, and citizenship. It is for this reason that the question of the role and status of the [Christian] Copts is so important" (pp. 90-91).

Scott implicitly acknowledges another tricky question: how "secular" has Egypt ever been? During the twentieth century, the Egyptian state asserted its Islamic character in various ways. The 1923 Constitution declared Islam the official religion of state. In 1971, Sadat ratified a new constitution that declared Shari'a law "a" main source of legislation. In 1980 the constitution changed the indefinite article to a definite one, pronouncing Shari'a "the" main source of legislation – a step that Scott describes as move towards "Islamization" (p. 58). At the time, many Copts appear to have viewed these constitutional recognitions of Shar'ia with dismay. Yet it is no longer true – if it ever was – that Copts endorse the creation of a (more) secular state.

Certainly Coptic secularists – like Muslim secularists – are rare creatures today. At a time when the Coptic Orthodox Church exerts a powerful influence over its members and provides them with welfare services, few Copts are calling for a purely

secular, pan-Egyptian civil law. Instead, argues Scott, “the majority of Copts”, like the majority of Muslims, appear to “envisage a kind of [Egyptian] citizenship that preserves religious identity and religious community” by law (p. 169).

As for members of the Muslim Brotherhood, a glance at their writings might suggest that they are evasive, even cagey, about the place of non-Muslims in an Islamist state. Some accuse the Muslim Brotherhood of practicing a Shi’a-like *taqiyya* or dissimulation, hiding their true ideas for the sake of self-preservation. But as Scott argues, “rather than interpreting ideological inconsistencies as duplicity on the part of the Muslim Brotherhood, one should view the group as a complex organization with competing and conflicting visions” (p. 53). That is, among Islamists there are liberals, conservatives, and radicals, as well as some who have changed their views over time.

Because Islamists tend to value early Islamic historical precedents so highly, many have hailed the the *dhimma* – the “pact” that historically applied to Christians and Jews in Islamic domains – as a model for regulating Coptic-Muslim relations in a future Egyptian Islamist state. Therefore Scott pays close attention to Islamist discussions of this subject. Yet while “*dhimma*” may evoke positive feelings among Muslims (who associate the term with an ideal of Islamic state tolerance toward “people of book”), Copts in Egypt seem widely to fear the formal revival of the *dhimma* system, recalling its assumptions of non-Muslim subordination and potential for humiliation. (They appear less concerned, by contrast, with the idea of the *millet* system of religious communities, as it existed in the late Ottoman period.) In some detail, Scott explains how various Egyptian Islamists have tried to reconcile ideals of Shari’a law and the *dhimma* with notions of citizenship in the modern nation-state. Many questions arise from their

discussions. Should Copts, as *dhimmis*, be able to serve in an Egyptian army that requires defense of Islamic statehood? (Many Islamists have said no to Coptic army service, and yes to the idea of reviving the *jizya* tax on Christians in lieu of military service.) Would a Christian's testimony count as much as a Muslim's in court, or would the life of a Christian (e.g., in a homicide case involving a Muslim) be valued as highly? (Islamists have not broached this question.) Can Christians serve as judges or even, in theory, as presidents? (Most say no.)

Ultimately, argued Ma'mun al-Hudaybi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, his own organization would accept Coptic involvement in the political system "as long as these Copts do what they are required to do" (p. 111). Meanwhile, the most radical Islamists deny that Christians should enjoy the protection enshrined in a *dhimma* system at all, and reject the idea that Muslims and Christians can be friends. But as Scott points out, such hardliners "are largely going against the Islamic historical experience, which is one that was defined by Christians and Muslims living together" (p. 191).

Scott highlights one group of Islamists who split off from the Muslim Brotherhood in 1996 to form a party called "*al-Wasat*" (meaning "the middle", implying centrism), and praises their contributions to theories of Islamist citizenship. "For the Wasatiyya Islamists," she writes, "non-Muslims have evolved to be part of the *umma*, which is the historical product of the cooperative efforts of all religious groups that have lived and worked together" (p. 135). Like other Islamists, Wasatiyya intellectuals stress Islamic law as the critical basis for Egyptian governance. What distinguishes them from other Islamists is their more inclusive understanding of Egyptianness and their congenial attitude towards Christians as co-nationals.

Why is this Wasatiyya-style vision of Egyptian Muslim-Christian fellowship not more prevalent among Islamists? Perhaps because debates on Islamist citizenship have occurred at a time when Muslims and Christians (outside of elite circles) have become increasingly isolated from each other. Scott quotes the Coptic intellectual Munir Fakhri Abd al-Nur, who embraces a vision of national unity. He lamented that “Muslims and Christians are not mixing together anymore.... I can see that; I can feel that. I go and sit in the cafes in the small streets of the very, very popular quarter. There are no Copts. I go to the churches, you find all the Copts there where they do everything” (p. 71).

In refreshingly clear, jargon-free language, Scott examines the spectrum of Coptic and Islamist thought as it relates to the theoretical place of non-Muslims as *dhimmis* or citizens in an Egyptian Islamized state. By the end, the question posed at the outset – “If Islamists were to assume power in Egypt, then what kind of Islamic state would they make?” – still lingers. But this, at least, seems evident: Pope Shenouda III and certain Coptic Orthodox Church leaders, who are anxious to preserve power in the church, share the Islamist desire to see the state and the law enshrine religious communalism. Thus church leaders may be willing to make a pact with Islamists in return for autonomy. In short, some Coptic leaders may welcome a neo-*millet* arrangement that lacks the official subordination of the *dhimma* system but that tacitly accepts the definition of Christians as junior citizens.

In Scott’s story, the most vulnerable non-Muslims in Egypt are the Baha’is, a tiny community with some 2,000 members. As followers of a post-Islamic religion, Baha’is have not enjoyed recognition as “people of the book” and have labored under a variety of civil disabilities in Egypt. Among moderate Islamists, not even Wasatiyya thinkers

(including the pro-Islamist Evangelical Christian, Rafiq Habib) have been prepared to endorse broad civil rights (such as the right to build places of worship) for Egypt's Baha'is. This last point suggests that, if an Islamist state were to take hold, religious liberty in Egypt would run against some hard limits.

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